

G. J. Demko's Landscapes of Crime



The Mystery Auf Deutsch

Crime fiction in German language countries – Germany, Switzerland, and Austria – has a very long and distinguished history and is truly remarkable for its popularity today. The genre, identified in German as "Kriminalgeschichte", "Detektivroman", "Kriminalroman", or simply as "Krimi" is sorely under appreciated in English-language countries and has been badly maligned by British and American gurus. William Huntington Wright in "Great Detective Stories" (in *The Art of the Mystery Story*, Howard Haycraft ed.) wrote that "Germanic attempts at this literary genre read like painstaking official reports, lacking imagination and dramatic suspense ... and the methods employed are generally obvious and heavy-footed and ... these efforts are abortive and ponderous". The venerable Howard Haycraft in his *Life and Times of the Detective Story* refers disdainfully to "continental [detective story] writers" as "quite inferior"!

These "experts" have clearly not read German mysteries or are chauvinists of the worst sort!

The earliest crime literature in the German lands were true crime reports published from 1730 to 1865 and popularly known as "Der Pitaval" after the French author of the original publications, F. Guyot de Pitaval. It is fascinating to note that a number of the early, classic German authors anticipated the genre in some of their work. The great Schiller in his 1786 novel, *Der Verbrecher aus verlorener Ehre* (Verlag der Bremer Presse, Munich, 1922) created a crime story of a sort. Similarly the renowned E.T.A. Hoffmann story *Mademoiselle von Scuderi*, (in *Selected Writings of*

E.T.A. Hoffmann, Vol. 1, University of Chicago Press, 1969) written in 1820, is a crime story in which Fraulein Scuderi somewhat unintentionally plays a detective role, an innocent person is exonerated, and a villain is bagged. A number of literary sources argue that Hoffmann was an important influence on Poe. The venerable poet Annette von Droste-Hulshoff's *The Jew's Beech* (John Calder, London, 1958) published in 1842 is a melodramatic story about a crime that solves itself with the commission of a suicide. German literature specialists argue that the first genuine German mystery was penned by Adolf Mullner in 1829 and entitled *Der Kaliber-* (Verlag von Phillip Reclam, Leipzig). It is indeed a crime story but lacks the complete nature of Poe's *Murder in the Rue Morgue*.

In the early part of the 20th Century there were a few interesting crime writers including Karl Rosner (*The King*, London, 1922) Dietrich Theden, and Austrian Baldwin Groller who created Detective Dagobert (*Detektiv Dagobert Taten und Abenteuer*, Phillip Reclam, Leipzig, 1910). However, one of the most influential authors in this period was Erich Kastner who launched one of the most popular children's series in 1929 with *Emil and the Detectives* (Doubleday, N.Y., 1950) and continued with a number of follow-ons (see for example, *Emil and the Three Twins*, Red Fox, London, 2002). Another influential and very popular writer began a series of novels featuring Sergeant Struder (*Wachtmeister Struder*, Arche, Zurich, 1954). This Swiss storyteller, Friedrich Glauser, published five Struder novels that were enormously popular. The Struder novels have been translated into many languages (except English) and one of the most prestigious prizes for German-language mysteries is named for Glauser.

The 1950s were marked by some very special contributions to the genre. In 1950 the Swiss playwright Friedrich Durrenmatt published a superb mystery entitled *The Judge and His Hangman* (Dolphin Books, N.Y., 1963), followed by *The Quarry* (New York Graphic Society, Greenwich, 1962) and *The Pledge* (Knopf, N.Y., 1959). The latter was made into a very popular Hollywood motion picture. These are outstanding mysteries – clever, suspenseful, philosophical and, in my opinion, brilliant. Durrenmatt is a cross between Jose Luis Borges and Hegel. In contrast, one of the most monetarily successful series ever produced was the "Jerry Cotton" novels. These spy-oriented potboilers began in 1954 featuring an American hero – a New York F.B.I. agent – known as Jerry Cotton. The author of the original

books was Delfried Kaufmann who was replaced by innumerable writers since the early tomes. The series has been published in 19 languages, has sold over 800 million copies, has been made into at least six motion pictures and continues to be published today. There is no accounting for bad taste.

Another unusual series of rather macabre mysteries was produced by Norbert Jacques and centered on the evil Dr. Mabuse (see for example, *Dr. Mabuse der Spieler – Dr. Mabuse the Gambler*, (Hammerich & Lesser, Hamburg, 1940) and *Dr. Mabuse: Master of Mystery*, (Allen and Unwin, London, 1923). Mabuse bears a close resemblance to the French villain, Fantomas. The Mabuse mysteries were really immortalized when the German movie director Fritz Lang produced three films based on the novels.

The Austrian writer Heimito von Doderer also contributed some excellent mysteries including *Every Man a Murderer* (Knopf, N.Y., 1964), a very literary mystery in which the main character becomes obsessed with the murder of his sister-in-law and, after much research, learns that he inadvertently caused, not her murder, but her accidental death. He also authored *The Waterfalls of Slunj* (Sun and Moon Press, Los Angeles, 1994). The postmodern Austrian writer Peter Handke also published a first class mystery, *Der Hausierer - The Peddler*, (Fischer Taschenbuch, Frankfurt, 1983). The late Heinrich Boll, Nobel Prize winner in 1972, wrote an outstanding mystery, *The Lost Honor of Katharine Blum* (Penguin, N.Y., 1994), set in Cologne and depicting a corrupt police system as well as an irresponsible press and featuring the antics of the terrorist group, the Red Army Faction. Hans Muller Kirst published more than 40 mysteries although he is best known for *The Night of the Generals* (Harper and Row, N.Y., 1963), made famous because of the motion picture of the same name. He also wrote an interesting set of mysteries including *A Time for Truth* (Collins, London, 1974) and *A Time for Payment* (Collins, 1976).

There are an enormous number of mystery writers active in Germany, Austria, and Switzerland today. One can find the names of more than 300 current Krimi writers listed on the web at [Lexikon der Deutschen Krimi-Autoren](http://www.lexikon-der-deutschen-krimi-autoren.de). One of the most frequently translated is Jakob Arjouni, a German

who has created a Turkish born/naturalized German detective named Kemal Kayanaka. The stories are excellent. Try, *Happy Birthday Turk* (Fromm International, N.Y., 1993) or *One Man, One Murder* (Harpenden, London, 1997, or *More Beer* (No Exit Press, London, 1996. Marianne Gruber, an Austrian, has published some very noteworthy mysteries including *Calm* (Ariadne Press, Riverside, Ca, 1999) and *Death of a Plover and Trace of the Buckskin* (Ariadne Press, Riverside, Ca. 1994). Pieke Biermann, referred to as the "Queen of German Crime" is a prolific author of hard-boiled police procedurals set in the underworld of Berlin and starring a quite narcissistic chief inspector Karin Lietze. Her rather staccato novel *Violetta* has been translated into English and is filled with prostitutes, neer-do-wells and other grisly characters (Serpent's Tail, London, 1996). Ingrid Noll has written some excellent mysteries including *Hell hath No Fury* (Harper Collins, N.Y. 1998) and *The Pharmacist* (Harper Collins, N.Y., 1999). Doris Gercke's *How many Miles To Babylon* (Women in Translation, Seattle, 1991) features Hamburg policewoman Bella Block who loves vodka and Russian literature and is a senior (in her 50s), cynical, sexy and very cool. Gercke is a prolific author who also writes TV and radio mysteries. Other distaff mystery writers include Thea Dorn who recently published *Ultima Ratio* (Rotbuch, Berlin, 2001), Gabriele Wolff, the creator of an interesting Cologne state attorney – Beate Fox - who solves legal crimes (*Kolscher Kaviar – Cologne Caviar – Verlag am Galgenberg, 1990*), and Sabine Deitmer who has published a number of mysteries in the 90s the best of which are *Bye Bye Bruno* (Fischer, Frankfurt, 1988) and *Neon Nights* (Fischer, Frankfurt, 1996). Malachy Hyde, a pseudonym for Ilka Stitz and Karola Hagemann, is noted for an historical series set in ancient Rome (see for example, *Eines jeden Kreuz*, Berlin, 2002).

On the lighter side and for cat lovers the Turkish-born Akif Pirincci writes a popular cat mystery series that are somewhat silly but fun. A few have been translated including *Felidae* (Fourth estate, London, 1994) and *Felidae on the Road* (Fourth estate, London, 1994). Peter Meisenberg sets a popular series in Cologne featuring Commissioner Lohr who battles crime in the "Chicago on the Rhine". Similarly Jacques Berndorf has developed a series set in the Eifel region south of Bonn that is redolent of the local culture.

There are, of course many more authors that could be described but space

does not permit. Clearly, the popularity of crime fiction in the German-language lands can hardly be exaggerated. Television and radio programs, films and publications for children featuring the genre abound. There are three prizes awarded annually for best mysteries – winner's names are available on the web site [Das Syndikat](#) maintained by German crime writers. The German-language mystery is a vibrant and amazingly popular phenomenon. Most mysteries are police procedurals and most authors are concerned with the search for justice. German Krimis have always been a superb and accurate window on German society, especially today in the tumultuous post-Cold War period of unification. It is noteworthy that many very renowned mainstream playwrights, novelists, and poets employed the genre to convey their messages. Crime fiction in the German realm is remarkably vibrant, creative and not readily available to, or fully appreciated by, English-language readers.

GJD

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